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Editorial

Inclusive education and “special pedagogy”: The Italian approach



Éducation inclusive et « pédagogie spéciale » : l'approche italienne

This special issue results from an editorial partnership between the Italian Society of Special Education (SIPES - *Società Italiana di Pedagogia Speciale*) and ALTER, (European Society for Disability Research). The aim has been for the SIPES to compose a special issue presenting research work related to inclusive education representative of the current Italian Educational Sciences academic production on the topic, and also of the research promoted by the SIPES. The SIPES, chaired by Professor Luigi d'Alonzo, is a learned society open to scholars, academics and researchers active in the field of Special Education. It was founded in Bologna in 2008 by a group of Italian University Professors with the purpose of supporting social sciences research on issues related to special education. The SIPES has a journal, Italian Journal of Special Education for Inclusion. Rivista semestrale della Società Italiana di Pedagogia Speciale (published by Pensa Multimedia, Lecce).

The interest of a special issue on inclusive education focused on Italy – it is not intended to be comprehensive on all aspects of the topic – lies in the original situation of this country in the international context as regards the schooling of children with disabilities (Benoit and Plaisance, 2009). As specified in the brief historical overview below, Italy developed very early innovative paths in support of the integration of children with disabilities through a radical change of policy in the mainstream school system; or, to put it negatively, by suppressing every mode of separate schooling, in the form of special schools or even of special classes in regular schools. In most countries, even in the so-called “developed” countries, people are still trying to figure out what are the possible modalities of a changeover from special to inclusive schooling, and correlatively what kind of personal assistance is needed in mainstream schools to underpin these changes. The UNESCO Conference (in course of publication) held in December 2013 dealt precisely with the trainings to be invented for a so-called “inclusive” school (meaning: adult education for teachers, other educators and carers). If we consider 1977, the year of the adoption of the Law on “integrazione scolastica”, as a start, we can say that Italy has over thirty-five years of experience with these key issues. The acquired experience of the Italian experts, and their latest questionings raised in the current Italian and European contexts constitute an important contribution.

The five original research articles gathered in this special issue do not obviously cover the whole scope of interest of the SIPES. However, we do believe that this special issue highlights the importance

that the Italian society in general attaches to the question of inclusion, and expounds the Italians' particular view on special education, as well as the Italian researchers' diverse approaches to the multifarious needs of children with disabilities. One of the articles offers a theoretical discussion about special education and the other four give an account of scientific studies based on experiences in the field, using either statistical analysis or action-research methods.

The concept of integration was introduced in Italy in the 1970s when the first experiments aimed at providing education for children with disabilities in mainstream schools were undertaken. The students' protests in 1968, the hardening of union actions concerning scholastic and teaching staff issues, and the demonstrations that took place between 1969 and 1972 led up to an animated parliamentary debate serving to introduce the school reform of 1974 (de Anna, 1980). New pedagogical models originated from this reform focused on the child: the development of his/her personality and his/her ability to communicate and to socialize. These models have proved that an integrated educational path could be effective both for the pupils with disabilities and for their schoolmates.

Meanwhile, the problems and the ineffectiveness of the "special classes" (i.e. separate classes or schools) became increasingly clear. The abolition of special classes was advocated in parliamentary proposals promoted in 1972 by left-wing politicians and supported by citizen initiatives. The project to reform the educational path for students with disabilities argued that all the efforts pertaining to special schools resulted in segregating such students and were in fact the most effective way to perpetuate or even to worsen their conditions.

During the decade 1961–1971, statistical reports recorded a growth in the number of pupils with special needs. This observation revealed the harmfulness of a system which views the differences as obstacles to learning and neglects to look for the best solutions to educate every individual. Special classes and special institutions equated different kinds of problems, confusing those arising from socio-cultural and affective deprivations and those resulting from disabilities. As a consequence, models that did not encourage anyone to learn were perpetuated (Canevaro & de Anna, 2010).

The protest movement against the existing situation of marginalization gained so much strength that all the Italian political parties, the Christian Democratic party included, were mobilized. The debate concerning the total exclusion issue led not only to review the institutional system but also to the radical decision to close psychiatric hospitals (Basaglia Law, 1978). This measure supposed to promote the interaction between the patients and the society at large was presented not as the closure of these hospitals but rather as "the opening of their doors" (de Anna, 1996). Modifying and renewing the social dynamics through the acknowledgement of the problems and enlightenment on debatable points were key objectives in the policy of the associations of persons with disabilities. In this perspective, it was necessary to grant everyone the possibility to become an active member of society, namely by having the right to study and to attend the nearest school in their neighbourhood.

The Law 517/77 was introduced in this atmosphere of renewal of the Italian educational system. It abolished special classes and special schools, and outlined different forms of integration in favour of pupils with disabilities who were admitted in mainstream schools with the support of specialized teachers.

The transition from a system of special education to the integration of children with disabilities in mainstream schools relates to the evolution of the management and of the organization of teaching in the school system, as well as to the shift from a constitutional state to a social state.

Today scientific discussions focus on the relationship between school and society, the aims of education, the different modes of intervention to be considered for the best adaptation, and last but not least, the role of teachers in the integration process of all children, particularly those with disabilities and Special Educational Needs (de Anna, 2009a, 2009b). Thus, training teachers has become essential in order to answer the actors' multifaceted needs (de Anna, 2008)¹. The rich Italian legislation (Disability Framework Law n° 104/92, Law on Students with Disabilities at University No. 17/99, Law on the Training for Work of Persons with Disabilities n° 68/99) makes it possible to follow and observe the different phases in the development up to now (de Anna, 2009a, 2009b).

¹ The Italian education minister, Carrozza, has just increased the number of assistant teachers in schools and is open to have diverse measures adopted in the training of all teachers in the perspective of inclusive education.

The alliances that are formed in the education field are a crucial point in the integration/inclusion process. Significant examples are the collaboration among teachers, the interaction between interventions inside and outside the educational institutions, and the cooperation and participation of the families in the construction of an education project and of a life project. The role played by the various associations is also a key element in this integration process. The issue of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) contributed greatly to strengthen these collaborations with local actors and to set up the personalized education plan (Law n° 328/2000).

The 9th International Congress on the Quality of Social and School Integration, held in Rimini, Italy on 7–10 November 2013, with more than 3000 attendees², also stressed that because of the importance of the inclusive school system, the policy for the integration of pupils and students with disabilities should be pursued notwithstanding any adverse social or economic conditions. Because the future well-being of a country depends largely on its relationship to culture and human civility, pupils and students with disabilities should be granted education in the mainstream school system and not in a separate system. All the attendees agreed that trusting schools, and particularly teachers whose role is extremely important in society, is a necessity; their diligence and sense of responsibility should be appreciated. It is a common mission and responsibility for all the people involved in the functioning of the school system to continuously renovate the cooperation with the families in order to implement the future solutions for an authentic social integration.

“Special Education” has an essential role to play in the integration and inclusion processes in schools and in society to establish connections between the various disciplines and competences in order to carry life projects for persons with disabilities to a successful conclusion.³

Each of the five articles that compose this special issue proposes a particular approach of inclusive education and addresses specific issues that are of interest in the current debates and discussions in the field of education.

The first article written by Marisa Pavone, Professor at Turin University, in collaboration with the researcher Alessia Farinelli, deals with the issues related to prevention and early intervention measures to be taken since the birth of a disabled child, how to intervene through a pedagogical action in the first days after birth, how to support the family, and how to collaborate with the paediatric nurses to implement a project of inclusive education. All this requires collaboration with the hospital, social services and health care, the acceptance and support of the family for the treatment in order to build an initial and global life plan.

The second article written by Antonello Mura, Professor at the University of Cagliari, deals with the problems related to the cooperation between families and institutions. In Italy, the family associations are of great importance. They were the first to demand, in the nineteen seventies, that the government provide education to children with disabilities in mainstream schools; they also played a strategic role in the discussions at the National Observatory of the Ministry of Education and carried weight in all the political decisions and choices that dealt with inclusion. The families have become experts on the issues of integration and inclusion; they take part in educational practices, thus founding the “parents’ pedagogy”.

The third article by Patrizia Sandri, Professor at the University of Bologna, is more theoretical and explores the meaning that Italy attaches to action and transformation of teaching meant to integrate children with disabilities in mainstream schools. The article discusses the epistemological foundations and refers to the literature on pedagogical action and peer learning. Sandri defines the implications of special education in regular contexts and presents some essential elements to adjust adequately the teaching strategies to the cognitive and affective characteristics of each pupil with special educational needs in order to achieve common goals.

² Among them there were school directors, educators, psychologists, social workers, teachers, associations of families, researchers and students and 200 relators, 83 workshops and 3 plenaries.

³ In order to eliminate misunderstandings on using the expression “special” it should be noted that its use in the institutional context is no longer accepted, but in pedagogy it refers to the use of measures or actions to meet the particular needs in an inclusive education. “Special institution” must therefore be distinguished from “special pedagogy”. Only the latter is pertinent in the Italian education context and implies the development of professional competencies.

The fourth article by Roberta Caldin, Professor at the University of Bologna, and her collaborators, examines a new challenge of society, that of integrating immigrant children with disabilities in inclusive schools. The originality of the research lies in an approach that combines the analysis of factors relating to disability and immigration. This research commissioned by the City of Bologna was undertaken on the assumption that school (with its various actors: teachers, headmaster, other pupils. . .) has a key role to play not only as an educative institution but also as an institution operating within a network enabling these families and these children to take their place in society, when offered an appropriate assistance. The authors first highlight the difficulties encountered by these families (precariousness, isolation of the mothers, language barriers), before considering the best way to meet their needs.

The fifth article coordinated by Lucia de Anna focuses on the life project of University students with disabilities. In a training environment using the Internet, where there is a constant shift between formal competencies (curricular didactic) and informal competencies (life experience), the professors develop a new method of learning and teaching intended to create inclusive learning contexts for young students and to promote active citizenship. The use of the Internet arouses the interest of students, professors and tutors in an inclusive society, where the differences and resources designed for all are appreciated and contribute to overcome cultural barriers as well as to enhance access to communication, relationship and learning.

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